

# One Small Star in the Cosmos

Kathy Angel

My father lets me hold the book while we stand in line. I stare at the cover. It says “COSMOS” in big, curvy letters over the author’s name and a picture of the universe bursting with orange stars. There is a large, bright area with something small floating in it that looks like a tiny propeller lost in a sea of exploding gases.

As we wait, my father tells me about the author. “He’s interested in evolution and the universe. He has a Ph.D. and a Pulitzer Prize. He’s a very intelligent man.” On Sunday nights, we watch this man on television, my little sister and I on the floor in our pajamas with pillows and blankets and bowls of popcorn. When I imitate the way the man says, “Billions and Billions,” pushing his lips forward and relishing the Bs, she giggles. When we get carried away, my father shushes us.

We have driven a long way to meet this man, and my father is dressed in clothes I only see him wear on Sundays. As we stand in line, he runs his thumbnail underneath his fingernails, trying to remove the half moon of dried blood at the base of his nails. Every night, when he comes home from his job at McCord’s Meats, he stands at the kitchen sink and scrubs under his nails with a stiff brush while he tells my mother about his day. Some of the blood is his — I’ve seen him make himself bleed, he scrubs so hard — but most of it is from the animals he cuts up into steaks and roasts and ribs.

The line to meet the author snakes around the bookstore, its end lost in the crowd. “Our sun is just one small star in the universe, Janie,” my father tells me. “*‘By space the universe encompasses and swallows me up like an atom; by thought I comprehend the world’*”. Blaise

Pascal said that. He was a great mathematician.” I never know if my father means to teach me or if he is just thinking out loud.

One time, I went to work with my father. Mrs. McCord suggested I stand out front with her and wait on customers behind the clean glass cases filled with neatly arranged cuts of meat, but my father said he wanted me to see what he did. It was summer, and he had instructed me to bring my winter coat so I could sit in the cold-storage room where he worked. That day, an entire pig hung upside down amongst unidentifiable sections of suspended meat. It was pale pink and muscular and if it wasn't for the head and tail, I might have mistaken it for a short, plump person. My father slit the pig down the front and stuck his hand inside. He severed the tissue along the spine that held the pig's organs in place and pulled everything down and out at the same time. It was all very neat and precise. When the pig was clean and ready for butchering, he cut off the tail and gave it to me. I wouldn't eat meat for a long time after that, and my father avoided speaking to me until I resumed the carnivore diet.

We are getting close to the front of the line, and my father whispers out of the side of his mouth, “There he is. There's Carl Sagan.” I peek through the space between the people in front of us. Perched behind a table, his hands curled in front of him, is the man from the television show. He looks like an eagle — his eyes are sharp and glittery under dark brows, and his large nose curves back against his face. Like my father, he is wearing a turtleneck and a beige corduroy jacket. My father is talking. “Light waves ... amplitude ... space travel. Are you listening, Janie?” I nod.

My father has a room full of strange, electronic equipment in our basement. The windows are covered with cardboard so it can be pitch black when he turns off the lights to do his experiments. He has a prism that breaks light into a rainbow, and there are boxes full of

capacitors and transistors and wires in lots of colors. Sometimes he gives me scraps, and I twist them into bracelets and rings.

The people standing in front of us move up to the table to meet Carl Sagan, and I feel the way I do at my recitals when the curtain opens and I am about to dance. My father is silent until they leave, and then he takes two big steps forward, his hands behind his back. Carl Sagan rises and sticks out his hand, and my father takes it, shakes it vigorously. Then Carl Sagan sits back down and asks my father for his name. He smiles at me and nods at the book, and I hand it to him. As he signs the inside cover, my father talks about the speed of light and interplanetary space travel.

“You sound like a very inquisitive man, Mr. Katsaros,” Carl Sagan says.

“I read a lot at night. I have a full set of encyclopedias, a spectrometer and an interferometer. I have a theory about the shape of the universe ...”

While my father talks, Carl Sagan purses his lips, the center of his brows drawn down. He nods and strokes his chin. The man beside Carl Sagan stands up to check the length of the line. Then he sits down and whispers in Carl Sagan’s ear.

“I’d love to talk with you some more, Mr. Katsaros. I’m sorry there’s not more time.”

The man beside Carl Sagan says, “Thank you,” to my father and then calls out, “Next!” My father stands there for a moment, almost forgetting to take the signed book. When he takes my hand to lead me away, I think about the bloodstains under his nails.